Cinderwill

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by 305unreal

Summary

Distraught over his mistreatment by his abusive stepfamily, Will encounters a kind young man called Han

The cold, wispy fingers of dawn pry Will Graham's eyes open, rousing him from a fitful slumber on his thin mattress in the damp cellar below the Verger estate. Groaning, he stretches out stiff limbs that ache from another night on the unforgiving floor. As pale yellow light streams through the high, barred windows, dancing dust motes swirl in the beams, hinting at the hard work that awaits in the new day. Will drags himself upright and splashes frigid well water on his face, hoping its bracing chill will chase away the last vestiges of dreary dreams. His breath catches in frosty puffs as he climbs the rickety steps, emerging into the cavernous kitchen that seemingly absorbs all warmth from his battered body. The scrubbed oak walls and flagstone floors only amplify an early morning silence, but he knows it won't last once the household is roused.

His first task is laying and lighting fires in the massive hearths that dot the drafty manor, their flickering flames soon becoming the only note of warmth or color in the gloomy interior. As heat and light gradually fill each musty room, Will imagines himself also thawing from his nighttime freeze. But the icy tendrils of exhaustion and dread still clutch at his soul as he hauls buckets of pure, icy water from the well for the day's tasks. And so the cycle begins anew, with Will clinging to fleeting moments of rest before the Verger family rises to continue their reign over the estate - and over him.

All too soon, Will has cooked a lavish breakfast for those in charge. He toils endlessly under Lady Verger's watchful eye and the hateful glares of her sons. Rumors of the Prince's upcoming ball have spread throughout the land, and the vain Verger family fears anything might outshine their supposed beauty and charm. As the sinking sun paints the sky in blazing shades of orange and red, Will finishes his final chore of the day - chopping firewood under the estate's ancient oak. His aching muscles begin to unwind as three familiar figures emerge from the forest's edge. Beverly, James, and Brian approach with mirth dancing in their eyes, having a special gift to lift Will's spirits.

"We've something for the ball, friend Will!" Beverly says excitedly.

Inside a patched box lies Will's father's old tailcoat, lovingly mended with scraps and stitches from the Verger mansion's scrap heap. Warm tears spring to Will's eyes at his friends' thoughtfulness, though dread still grips his heart at the family's cruel machinations. That night, as the manor sleeps, Will sneaks away to the privacy of the cramped attic room. There, he dances in front of a cracked mirror, humming a tune his father once sang long ago. The frock fits him perfectly, and for a moment Will imagines escaping to the ball, if only in daydreams as colorful as the setting sun.

As the morning sun casts its warm glow over the dewy grounds of Verger estate, Will finds solace in simple tasks alongside his dear friends. Beverly, James, and Brian gather eggs from the coop, their cheerful banter and laughter providing a balm to Will's weary soul. Yet heaviness still weighs in his heart as thoughts turn to his late father - the kindly farmer whose smile had been snuffed out all too soon, just two years past. Shaking away memories, Will sets to scouring another pot blackened by his gluttonous stepbrothers' excess.

"Look alive, the harpy's stirring!" Brian stages a warning whisper, and the trio disappears just as Lady Verger's shrill voice pierces the calm.

Rolling his eyes, Will hurries to serve the hateful mistress and her loutish sons - Mason and Garrett, who never miss a chance to torment their servant.

"Late again, Cinderwill? You'll regret keeping Mother waiting," Mason sneers around a mouthful of yesterday's eggs.

No sooner does Will finish tidying than Lady Verger sweeps in, steel blue eyes scanning for any speck of dirt upon which to unleash her wrath. "The front path still needs weeding, boy, and don't forget about mucking the stables!" she snaps.

With a nod, Will flees her venomous presence, dreading the labor such extra chores will demand of his aching body. Yet as he works, strong and steady despite weariness, a pair of observant eyes note far more than the soot staining his face. From a passing carriage, a keen mind perceives the boy's resilience and dignity despite his lowly station. Eyes that see far more than the ruined clothes and soot-smeared face of the serving boy known as Cinderwill. The summer sun beats down relentlessly as Will continues extracting stubborn weeds and roots from the garden beds. He knows well that in Lady Verger's eyes, her spoiled sons deserve everything - including ownership of the estate someday, rather than her unwanted charge. Of course, the twin brothers relish any excuse to torment their favored target.

"Oh, Cinderwill?" calls Garrett in a mockingly sweet tone hours later.

Dread pooling in his stomach, Will slowly turns to face them — only for the color to drain from his face. There, in a muddy puddle, lay the shredded remnants of the delicate fabric that was once his father’s frock. Unable to speak, Will flees into the garden, collapsing upon a worn bench as anguished sobs wrack his body. Not long after, soft hoofbeats interrupt his

tears. Looking up with red-rimmed eyes, Will glimpses dazzling hazel orbs peering down from atop a noble steed.

“Troubles, friend?” asks the rider, a striking young man who appears unfamiliar.

Though exhausted and grief-stricken, something in Will bids him pour out his sorrows to this kind stranger called Han.

As dusk’s final rays fade into shadows, Han speaks. “Dry your tears—I mean to remedy this. Meet me at the crossroads after midnight, and your night need not end in darkness.”

With a hopeful heart amidst his pain, Will decides to grasp at the chance of light this mysterious Good Samaritan offers, recalling his father’s courage in often grim circumstances.

However, as night falls over the Verger estate, Mason and Garrett rustle about preparing for the ball, complaining of duties left undone. "That scullery scum has shirked its chores again," Mason grumbles to his mother.

Lady Verger's painted lips curl into a smirk. She calls to her guard Lucifer, "See the stables are mucked posthaste. And if Cinderwill is slow to obey, you have my leave to... expedite her efforts." Crueller still, she grows her grin.

Alone mending tack by lantern light, Will starts at Lucifer's approach.

"The mistress bade me help with your workload," the man leers, brandishing his cudgel.

Will stumbles back in alarm, no allies in sight as the first blow falls. He tries hard to muffle his screams and sobs, even as Lucifer's boot makes contact with his side and his legs. Something cracks when the bludgeon strikes his face. Lucifer grabs the back of his head, grasping a clump of the child’s hair, dragging Will across the muck, and throwing him against the nearest wall. In the past, Will would have tossed and turned. He would have kicked out and his arms would have flailed. He knows better now. He's insignificant. The man doesn't let

him slump onto the ground yet; he picks him up by the throat and throws him harshly against the cracked wood. Will gasps for air, eyes struggling to gain focus - but Lucifer keeps him awake by kicking him hard in the stomach with his steel-toed boot. There's more blood than there should be. Not for the first time, Will contemplates ending it all and joining his father. A chill runs down his spine when his stepmother's guard removes the buckle at his waist... but he feels an odd sense of relief when the man uses it to whip his blood-stained skin. Under indifferent stars he's beaten, left wheezing in the dirt while those who should protect delight instead in his pain.

Every labored breath agony, Cinderwill somehow summons the strength to crawl to the farthest empty stall. There amid threadbare hay, he collapses with bruises blooming purple across skin stretched taut over frail bones. What new torments might tomorrow bring, he knows not, only praying cracked lips for respite as the Vergers depart in finery for the ball. As the manor falls still, three familiar figures approach the barn with furtive steps. Beverly, Brian, and James had watched Will flee the stables in anguish, unable to aid him against Lucifer's brutality. Now they emerge from the shadow with ointments and bandages obtained through risks of their own. Gently they tend to each wound, cutting away soiled cloth to reveal more damage beneath. But with care and companionship comes comfort, and Will finds rescue in soft conversations that steer his thoughts from pain. Beverly dabs healing salves as Brian splints split skin, while James offers water in sips, hoping their humble aid may grant some restoration by night's end. Though worries persist, friendship can find the strength to face each new sunrise.

As the third day's light filters through grimy windows, a cacophony of shrieks and shouts arise from above, in the manor. Against his sore body’s protests, curiosity drives Will to limp toward the commotion. In the grand sitting room, amongst finery and fidgeting Vergers, stands the stern yet regal form of their kingdom’s teenage prince. Though his face remains tranquil, fury simmers in Hannibal’s gaze.

“How dare any lay hands on one under my family’s protection?” he asks softly, each word a sharpened blade.

Lady Verger falls to her knees, begging mercy, but Hannibal’s eyes have already found another. Despite tattered rags against luxurious silks and velvets, Will stands revealed. Hannibal glides near, gently grasping Will’s bruised hands as if they're fine porcelain.

“Your suffering ends this day. Come, you are wanted at the castle,” he declares with a small smile that hides dark promises of vengeance.

Too stunned to respond, Will nods as Hannibal lifts him into the Lecters' golden coach with ease and care, as if carrying something infinitely precious. As the horses pull them away, Will's tormentors disappear into twilight shadows, and for the first time, hope lights within the weary servant's heart that brighter days may dawn. The carriage ride passes in a comfortable silence as Will slowly recovers from his recent ordeal. Glancing at his rescuer in the lantern's flickering light, the confusion slowly lifts from his weary mind.

"Forgive me, my lord, but...were you the one who found me in the garden that night?" he asks hesitantly.

Hannibal smiles, his eyes softening with the memory. "Indeed I was, though I did not introduce myself fully. I am Prince Hannibal," he replies.

Will gasps, his cheeks flushing in mortification. "My prince, I-I had no idea. I never meant any disrespect," he stammers, hanging his head low.

A gentle hand lifts his chin. "And I meant only to offer comfort, not cause further distress. Consider my identity of little importance - I am simply glad to aid a soul in need."

Regaining courage, Will speaks from his heart. "You showed me true kindness when all seemed lost, Han. For that, I can never thank or repay you enough."

Hannibal is stricken by his earnest words, his gaze flickering with long-buried emotion. "Your gratitude is all the payment I desire, Dearest Will," he replies softly.

As the warming sunrise illuminates the royal carriage, Will allows oblivion's gentle hands to claim him, finding more comfort among fine silks than he ever had among the straw. Yet Hannibal observes silently, noting the lingering hurt that passes over Will's fair features even in slumber.

"Forgive me, but your dreams betray some deeper pain. Might sharing the events of that night ease my mind and lighten your load?" he asks softly when luminous blue eyes flutter open

once more.

Will sighs, gaze falling. "It is a dark tale that brings me shame, my prince. When I fled, their brutality had left me little more than broken flesh amongst the hay. My closest friends worked through the night tending my wounds and keeping watch, but their efforts could not erase what had been done."

Hannibal's carefully composed mask slips then, giving way to a rage protective yet perilous. "Then Lucifer's evils cut deeper than imagined," he snarls before regaining courtesy. "Forgive me, dear Will - only thoughts of your suffering stir such shadows in my heart. Know that you are safe now, and those vile souls will trouble you no more."

Trembling, Will dares lay a hand upon Hannibal's in silent gratitude, feeling profoundly protected despite the prince's veiled vow of vengeance. "Your sworn care and guardianship are balm enough, my prince. And because of your nobility that night, I am in your debt forevermore."

Hannibal lifts Will's hand to lips, eyes shining with emotion. "Between us, there are only promises - of comfort, honor, and whatever joy each new dawn may hold."

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